IAN FRASER

THE STATE AND THE BLIND

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THE STATE AND THE BLIND

RELATIONS between the State and the blind, bespeaking sympathy and interest and a real desire for the emancipation of blind people, are of very recent development. They have grown out of the mounting body of public opinion that blindness was not a disgrace, not a hopeless, ineradicable infirmity, but a handicap which merited all the time and attention which could be spared for its reduction. The attitude of the Roman emperors, and even of the Norman kings of England, in depriving of sight their enemies and those of their subjects who trespassed against them was only a reflection of the attitude of the common people of those times. The blind person was the person without hope; one would almost sooner be dead than have to stand in his shoes. How, then, inflict a severer penalty than by forcing this degradation upon your Christian who would not acknowledge your gods, or your peasant who dared to take to himself the royal prerogative of dining off venison? It was only later, when blinding as a punishment had been abolished, and blindness could therefore be looked on as an unmerited misfortune, that the thought crept into the minds of the ordinary man and woman, 'There, but for the grace of God, go I.' It is a short step from this self-centred view to a practical sympathy: official investigations began to be made and laws for the amelioration of the lot of the blind to take their place upon the Statute-book.

Even then the State lagged heavily behind public opinion. The first voluntary institution for the blind in England, for instance, was founded in Liverpool in 1791. The Blind Persons Act, which set on foot a widespread national scheme of State aid for the blind, became law in 1920. The institutional system alone, while opening wide its gates and caring most admirably for those who found their way within them, could not hope to cover the whole of the ground. Yet the voluntary system led the way. The State, at last fully alive to the importance of the blind adult as citizen and the blind child as potential citizen, only followed down the paths to which others had fixed the sign-posts.

One of the earliest cases in which we hear of the State—in the form of the ruler—coming forward as champion of the blind

occurred in Japan. There in the ninth century a young prince, son of the fifty-fourth emperor, lost his sight. He and his father straightway developed a personal interest in blind people, and the prince, on entering the priesthood, distributed his income among them. Nor was this all. Several blind men of proved capacity were taken into Government service, and a decree was issued giving over the profession of massage entirely into the hands of the blind. Whether we can look upon the granting of this exceptional favour as being due to the impartial judgment of an impersonal Government, or whether we must see in it only the good resulting from the affliction of a powerful prince, is largely dependent on our point of view. There is no doubt at all that blindness attacking the households of the wealthy or socially important has been a noticeable factor in the growth of an interested public opinion, and so of an interested State. There are on record numerous cases all over the world of philanthropic effort initiated by educated blind people ; in a very real sense, from the earliest times, the case has been that of the blind leading the blind.

Unfortunately, the sequel to the story of Prince Hitoyasu occurred centuries later, when in 1870 the privileges of the blind in Japan were swept away and those with sight were permitted to enter into competition with them. In recent years, however, Japan has developed methods of caring for her blind comparable with those in force in other countries.

There is no example now of State monopolies being granted to the blind. The nearest we get to State interference in the employment of blind people is in Germany, where by a Reich Act of 1923 the engagement of a small percentage of disabled men, including the blind, among normal workers was made compulsory. A recalcitrant employer might be fined. In France also a Compulsory Employment Act was passed in 1924, but only those blind persons who lost their sight in the World War can claim benefit under it. Here and there, too, in Europe, where there are State monopolies in handling tobacco or matches, a preference in the matter of employment has been granted to the disabled, including the blind. England's very mild version of this official interference is a recommendation by the Government to the Government departments and local authorities that, other things being equal, they should give preference to goods produced by workshops for the blind. Scotland gives a preference to the blind in the matter of employment as home teachers of the blind.

As can be readily understood, the war of 1914–18 gave a great impetus to the movement for the emancipation of the blind. Every nation involved in the holocaust was driven to face the problem of making some provision for a number of vigorous

citizens, normal in every way, but deprived of sight, and with a claim on their country which nobody could dispute.

On this occasion no one Government required waking up to the magnitude of its responsibilities. Legislation to do with the blind which had been hanging fire or had been received with half-hearted support was speeded up. So it came about that the civilian blind, the men and women who (many of them) had never known sight, found their position firmer and their prospects brighter through the accession to their ranks of thousands of men who had grown to manhood in full enjoyment of all their senses. Thus did history repeat itself, for the earliest public institution established for the blind which still exists, now under State management, was the Hospice des Quinze Vingts in Paris, said to have been founded by Louis IX. (Saint Louis) about 1260, for men who had been blinded following his banner to the Crusades. Civilians soon attached themselves to this institution, which later gathered much wealth, although at its inception the inmates were encouraged to beg for their living. One scarcely needs the assurance that such encouragement is not given nowadays. In its stead all efforts are brought to bear that these blind, as also the blind in every civilised country in the world, shall aim at self-support. One of the most important results of State legislation for the blind is, indeed, that begging by the blind is more or less sternly discouraged and that an increasing number of authorities are making assistance conditional on the practice of mendicancy being discontinued. Nevertheless, even legislation has not always been guiltless in this respect. At one time begging by blind persons was specially legalised in certain countries. In truth, all down the pages of history the dragging stick, the piteous cry for alms of the blind beggar, rings in our ears. ' Pity the blind ! ' ' Pity the blind ! ' It was when this cry began to sound unnatural to those who heard it—when the reaction to it came to be ' Why pity the blind ? Why not help them, and help them to help themselves ? '—that the citizens of each country banded themselves together in voluntary organisations, and, eventually finding these efforts insufficient, pressed the State to share their burden.

Apart from a few instances where the ruler of a country has taken upon himself the responsibility for at least some of his blind subjects, there is little heard of any Government action till the nineteenth century. Certainly the Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles—the first school specifically for the blind—had been taken over by the State in Paris in 1791 during the French Revolution. But in its early stages the growth of activity by Government was slow. It was with the development of the idea of universal education that the problem became for the first time

insistent. What were you to do with your blind children? Unless special provision could be made for them the talk of universal education was a sham. So special provision was made, and legislative enactments passed in a number of countries, requiring the establishment of schools for the blind, and, in some, making school attendance compulsory on blind children. The cost of this education was taken over in varying degrees in whole or in part by the State, the public authorities, and voluntary societies. Even maintenance costs, where the parents were indigent, began usually to be met by the local Poor Law authority. The lot of the uneducated blind child was felt to be the unhappiest lot which could fall to human experience. At the same time it dawned on the State that such a child must necessarily grow up to an adult life dependent always on public moneys. Sentiment and cold expediency went therefore, for once, hand in hand. There are few countries, as a result, where the provision of special education for blind children is not now made. In many countries it is still the only form of State action, and the difficulties of the blind man or woman who has passed school age are relieved only by voluntary societies.

The acceptance of responsibility by the State for the welfare of the blind, as such, is indeed comparatively rare. In most cases the adult blind are provided for in the same way as other citizens. That is, if they are indigent they come under the Poor Law; if aged, under old-age pensions schemes; if disabled, under invalidity and disablement insurance. On the other hand, in many countries which do not make direct provision for the blind, the work of voluntary associations is often encouraged and assisted by the grant of State moneys. Usually the war-blinded are placed in a separate category and are given preferential treatment both as regards work and pensions.

Generally speaking, the countries which come best out of the test of State responsibility for the blind are the English-speaking countries. In a number of the States of the United States, State commissions for the welfare of the blind have been set up, and many States grant pensions to blind persons as such. In Great Britain limited State pensions are paid, and a variety of local services are insisted upon by the State and supported from public funds.

It cannot be too strongly emphasised that this activity, though it had its beginning before the war, was stimulated in a very natural way by the return of blinded men from the fighting forces. For example, in most European countries, voluntary effort arising spontaneously out of the needs of the war has spurred civilian agencies to greater efforts. The needs of the blinded soldier, being much advertised and calling forth generous response, have encouraged the general idea of giving

help to the blind. And again, in Germany, the Compulsory Employment Act, orginating as a result of the war, to find work for disabled soldiers, including the blinded, was later amended to include the civilian blind.

In many countries, too, the entry into the blind world of young men cut off from their usual avocations by their disability has reinforced the ranks of the natural leaders of the blind. This is specially noticeable in the British Empire, where in no less than three of the Dominions national organisations for the welfare of the blind as a whole have been initiated or have been very greatly developed, largely through the individual efforts of returned blinded soldiers who received their initial training and inspiration at St. Dunstan's. It may be said that the State is now fully alive to its duty towards the blind, and that the next decade will see even greater development towards universal State assistance than has been attained in the most forward countries and the acceptance of State responsibility by those which are still backward.

If this historical survey conveys anything like a true impression of the development of the care of the blind, the first lesson to be derived from it is that voluntary effort has played and still plays a noteworthy part. There will be in every State at every time a minority who are in advance of the majority in their view of their duty towards their neighbour. These will band themselves together voluntarily to make provision for the sick, the poor, and the blind. There are foundations in every civilised country which bear witness to early movements of this nature. There will always be such persons, and consequently there will always be voluntary efforts, going beyond the efforts of the State, pioneering, inventing, devising new means of helping. It is difficult to imagine a situation in which a State, so satisfied with its efforts for the unfortunate, will make voluntary effort illegal. It would be an infringement of the liberty of the enlightened pioneers which they themselves ought not to tolerate.

On the other hand, the volunteers must not be permitted to establish vested interests in voluntarism, and if and when they and others can persuade the State to take over and administer routine methods of assistance out of public funds they should not resist. There should be a gradual evolution which allows of the State taking up and operating approved and tested services for the blind as the material wealth of the society, and the general opinion of its citizens, makes it possible and desirable. And wherever such routine operations are taken over by the State the voluntary spirit and machinery should be maintained and diverted to new fields of activity. The needs of the blind are so great that every resource must be mobilised to meet them. The conclusion

reached, therefore, is that there should be co-operation between the State and voluntary effort, and that aid for the blind should be developed by these two agencies on co-ordinated lines of true and friendly partnership.

Broadly, the development in the care of the blind by the State is only a specialised part of the care of unfortunate citizens as a whole. The primary motive which moves human society to care for its unfortunates is, not sympathy, but self-preservation. There cannot be a healthy and progressive society if many of the units which form it are starving and discontented. Hence, as the idea of governance develops and a national conscience is awakened, the executives take upon themselves the task of caring for those who cannot adequately care for themselves. At first coldly self-protective, the State moves gradually towards a more humane and philanthropic outlook. There are many thousands, perhaps millions, of individuals who are moved, sometimes unwittingly, by the Christian ideal, to sacrifice time, labour and money to help their unfortunate fellow-beings, and particularly those who are blind. These are the backbone of the voluntary work which is done all over the world. But they are also to be found in large numbers in Government offices and Parliaments, municipal departments and local councils. Thus the whole question as to what the State should do for the blind is influenced by kindly personal sentiment. It is legitimate for those who seek favours for the blind to accept the advantages of this goodwill, but they should never take advantage of it.

Much loose talk abounds as to men's rights. The right to live, the right to a living wage, the right to justice as opposed to charity, are proclaimed all over the world by blind and sighted alike. The truth is that there is no natural right to live, and that the statutory rights or traditional rights acquired by those who need other people's help in living their lives are concessions made to them for the sake of or by the goodwill of the community. It would be well if blind people were to realise this truth, for, human nature being what it is, they would secure more satisfaction from their lives and greater assistance from their fellows if they approached them in this spirit.

Not all blind people must be wholly dependent upon those who can see. Many find themselves in positions in which they can choose who shall care for them, and many may contribute much by thought and deed to the well-being of the society in which they live. But as a whole the blind throughout the world must needs ask help from those who can see, and it would be more graceful and fruitful for them and their representatives to ask reasonably than to demand, basing their claim upon some supposed natural rights which are fictitious. They may be

assured that wherever and whenever they ask for consideration of their proposals they will be well received. They should be careful, however, neither to overstate their case nor to press their demands too strongly, lest they do harm to the cause they desire to help.

Why should there be legislation for the blind as a special class? Probably there is no logical answer to this question. Certain writers suggest a reason in the thought that the blind are much more severely handicapped from an economic point of view than the deaf or the crippled, and that this distinguishes the blind as a class apart from other disabled persons, and justifies special legislation on their behalf. No doubt this is an important consideration. In addition, perhaps there is a peculiar sentiment for the blind arising out of some of the factors mentioned earlier, and again there is a larger number of persons incapacitated by blindness than by any other single disability of the same magnitude. Another point may be that, although definition of any class is difficult, it is easier for practical purposes to define blindness, and to treat those coming within the definition as belonging to a special class, than to define other disabilities and classify those who suffer from them. The phrase 'The world of the blind' indicates how the popular imagination can appreciate the peculiar position of this class, and can isolate them from the rest of mankind. We seldom hear the phrases 'The world of the deaf' or 'The world of the crippled,' and such conceptions are difficult.

Perhaps imagination, not reason, is the principal answer to the question. Every seeing person can imagine himself blind; it is so easy to achieve blindness by merely closing the eyelids, or by trying to find the way in a really dark place. Moreover, fear of the darkness is instinctive.

This Act was the first attempt to provide nationally and comprehensively for all sections of a blind community.

Mainly, the Act falls into two parts: (1) That which the national Government undertakes to do entirely from its own financial resources—namely, to pay pensions to practically all blind persons over fifty years of age; (2) that under which the national Government requires local authorities to make a comprehensive scheme, the expense of which will be shared from national and local funds. These schemes may include the establishment and maintenance of homes, hostels and workshops, the payment of allowances to the unemployable blind, and the organisation of home teaching and home workers' schemes; they may be undertaken either directly through machinery owned and operated by the local authority, or in conjunction with or through the agency of voluntary bodies. Generally speaking, the local authorities have operated their schemes in conjunction with

voluntary agencies in their desire to make use of the specialised knowledge and voluntary services which were already available.

There is a good deal of argument as to whether the second part of the Act should have compelled a national standard of care for the blind instead of permitting a large local discretion. The general question may be put thus. How far can and should the central authority in an administrative unit like Great Britain impose upon subordinate local authorities the duty to initiate social services or to maintain them at a prescribed standard? Politicians who call themselves progressive or socialistic take the view that all local authorities should be compelled to maintain a high standard of care for the blind and that the expense should be wholly or mainly borne by the Exchequer. More conservative thinkers consider that a large degree of autonomy in local government is a sound principle and that local administration should be to a substantial extent locally financed. This course prevents a local authority spending huge sums of money provided by the Exchequer, without due regard to the interests of public economy. If the local authority can secure an important social service without the citizens as such having to pay for it, there is no check upon most rapid development—good in itself, but possibly disastrous in its cumulative effect to the solvency of the national Exchequer.

The Blind Persons Act takes a middle course. It compels local authorities to submit a comprehensive scheme which they will be prepared to carry out, but it does not compel adherence to a particular method, and it leaves the generosity of the scheme very largely for local decision. The result is that there are great variations in the scale of treatment of the blind. These present anomalies which may be criticised, but English tradition is opposed to undue compulsion of local authorities. In all probability an opportunity will present itself in the next few years for the whole subject to be re-examined, and by that time a natural level, to which probably the majority of local authorities will conform, will have been reached. When this is the case the time will have come to compel the minority who have been less generous or enterprising in their aid for the blind to advance to the standard of the majority.

There are in addition two forms of registration incorporated in the Act—registration of the blind persons themselves and registration of voluntary charities operating on behalf of the blind. The former requires little comment; it is merely an attempt, which has been singularly successful, to secure through local sources exact information as to the names, addresses, and circumstances of all blind persons. It will readily be understood what an advantage this is to Government departments concerned

with such matters as the prevention of the causes of blindness, as well as to the local bodies themselves, who can thus base their plans upon accurate statistics.

The second form of registration—namely, that of voluntary agencies—is more open to argument. The object of this registration is to give the public some guarantee that charities for the blind are operated *bonâ fide* in the interests of the blind and are not conducted for improper objects or for the benefit of the people who initiate or manage them. It is open to question whether some of the smaller local authorities are competent to exercise supervision of this sort. In general, however, opinion seems to agree that registration of great national collecting bodies by a competent authority such as the London County Council, in whose area most of these national bodies have their headquarters, is a sound and proper interference by the State with the liberty of the subscribers and managers of the voluntary organisations. Registration by local authorities does not involve interference in policy, but ensures merely that accounts are kept, that the objects of the trusts are carried out, and that the administration comes up to a reasonably high standard of efficiency. The cause of the blind makes such a strong appeal that unscrupulous people are apt to use it to their own ends. In these circumstances it is probably in the interests of sound and established charities for the blind to be registered, which prevents abuse, and thus avoids the possibility that generous people may hesitate to give donations or subscriptions for the welfare of the blind.

The Act, of course, includes a definition of blindness, as does a much earlier Act which made State provision for the education of blind children. Any statute making special provisions for a section of the community must define the persons to whom it applies. This is a difficult problem, and as a result there are a variety of standards in operation throughout the world. This renders comparison of statistics relating to the blind in various countries difficult, and it is time that international action was taken to explore the possibility of setting up international standards.

The age at which pensions are now paid in Great Britain—namely, fifty years—should be gradually reduced, and the amount of the pension increased, as and when Parliament can be brought to face the necessary expenditure. Such reduction of the age and increase of the amount should continue until a subsistence pension is payable to all blind persons in respect of their blindness, and for no other reason, after the age of sixteen, or when they cease vocational training or education. There should be a means test of a simple character which prevents the pension being paid to blind people who have independent means or are engaged in

professional occupations which render it unnecessary for them to be subsidised in this way. The means figure above which the pension would be stopped should be a relatively high one, so that all but a few fortunate blind people would receive the pension.

Some critics of general pensions believe that any general pension paid to the blind is undesirable because it lessens their desire to work. The great majority of blind people cannot in any circumstances at present, or soon likely to be available, maintain themselves without assistance. It seems, therefore, that a disability pension is the simplest and most efficient, as well as the most sympathetic, method of meeting the difficulty of providing them with the means to live, or compensating them for their handicap. In the present depressed state of the country no Government, whatever its political views, would grant really generous pensions to all blind people. Even when better times return, such pensions as may be granted will provide only a mere subsistence, and there will still be a strong incentive to all who are capable, and have the opportunity, to augment the pension by useful work.

The activities of State and municipality are so varied that they come into contact directly or indirectly with almost every type of professional or industrial employment. There are, therefore, many opportunities for Government and municipal departments to give direct employment to or influence employment for professional and non-manual blind workers, such as teachers, masseurs, organists, telephone operators, typists, etc. In some departments trouble is taken to fit suitable blind persons into such posts, but much more might be done. It is a matter to which all concerned should give more consideration than is given at present. It is far more difficult to find congenial employment for mental ability than for physical ability amongst the blind, and the State and municipal authorities should not only help to solve this problem, but should set an example to other employers.

The natural leaders of the blind are those who have the requisite character and ability and are themselves blind. They have the advantage in representing the case of the blind that they are themselves representative of the class for whom they plead. They have a greater understanding of the psychology of the people with whose affairs they deal, and frequently added authority is given to what they say to their followers by the fact that they are themselves experts in overcoming the difficulties imposed by blindness. Government departments, municipal authorities, and voluntary associations for the blind should, wherever possible, give employment to suitable blind persons in advisory and executive posts.

Blind people throughout the world owe the improvement which has taken place in their lot to the understanding, sympathy, and sacrifice of their sighted fellows. But the public conscience has at all times been stimulated to a fuller conception of its duty towards the blind by the personal example and advocacy of outstanding blind people, such as Henry Fawcett and Arthur Pearson. This should be borne in mind, and in every country encouragement should be given to young blind people, who have the gift of leadership, to come forward and help to guide the blind community towards greater opportunities for material and spiritual well-being.

IAN FRASER.

PSYCHIC PHENOMENA

Suggestions Towards a Revaluation—II

The Great War, with its agonies of separation and bereavement, was the natural prelude to a wave of thaumaturgy. As the slaughter grew, and more and more instances were recorded of lost ones appearing again in dream and vision, the bereaved turned passionately in thousands to any channel which promised a communion with their dead. Many consulted professional mediums; others broke their health in the effort to pierce the veil; to others visions came unsought. The level of the world's consciousness was disturbed. For a time the cult of communication threatened to upset the proportions of traditional religion. Those to whom visions were given were so full of awe and thanksgiving that the bare suggestion of scrutiny must have seemed impious. And, indeed, who in those days had the heart to question what was for so many their one stay and comfort? To-day, however, our hands are no longer tied. Now that a decent interval has elapsed and the first raw ache of our pity has eased, it may be opportune to look closely into these visions; and to realise that, quite apart from all belief or disbelief in their alleged causes, there exist grave reasons for caution, for which we need go no further than the nature of our own perceptions. Whatever we think, however strong our faith, we shall do it no harm by inquiring as closely and as scrupulously into this branch of human experience as into any other. If we establish nothing scientifically, we shall at least clear the ground and provide data for our successors.

First of all, then, let us set all questions of self-delusion, trickery, and the like, upon one side. We are not interested in fraudulent mediums; their exposure only confuses the issue. It is not evidence one way or the other. It may show that a particular communication was a fake, but that does not mean that all communications received through the same channel were faked. It affects the central truth no more than the malpractice of an individual priest affects his religion. Nor will it help us to establish that Mrs. Smith, of such and such a street, who related

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